

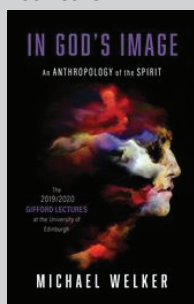
Reflections on the human spirit and divine spirit: Michael Welker's natural theology



Book title:

In God's image: An anthropology of the Spirit

Book Cover:



Author:

Michael Welker

ISBN:

978-0-8028-7866-3

Publisher:

Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021, R499.36*
*Book price at time of review

Review Title:

Reflections on the human spirit and divine spirit. Michael Welker's natural theology

Reviewer:

Nico Vorster¹

Affiliation:

¹Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Nico Vorster,
nico.vorster@nwu.ac.za

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

The publication *In God's image: An anthropology of the Spirit*, originated from the Gifford lectures that Michael Welker delivered in 2019/2020 in Edinburgh. The Gifford lectures are dedicated to the theme of science and theology and, specifically, the quest for a natural theology that speaks a universally valid language. Despite rejecting the natural law tradition as a valid source of science-theology debates, Welker has for decades been a proponent of inter-disciplinary dialogue. In fact, Welker's own theology is marked by the interpenetration of biblical logic and philosophical reflections, especially systems thinking.

In this book, Welker attempts to articulate a natural theology that starts with an analysis of cultural and social phenomena and then proceeds to incorporate philosophical, cultural, religious and theological reflections into the debate (p. 2). He begins the discussion with a poignant question: If one considers the breadth of human wretchedness and destructiveness, is it indeed possible to refer to human beings as created in the image of God? After engaging with Hannah Arendt, Kant and Habermas, Welker warns that 'new' communities cannot be constructed on the basis of bi-polar understandings of relations (e.g. God and person, I and thou, object-subject). Actual social constellations are far more complicated.

Welker holds that the workings of human and divine spirit are 'multi-modal' and 'multi-polar' in nature. With multi-modal he means that people interact and cooperate with each other by way of multiple mediums and plural actions that cannot be traced back to simple 'cause and effect chains' (p. 26). By multi-polar he means that modern social arrangements are made up of several power centres that balance each other.

Returning to the question on whether we can speak of humans as created in the image of God, Welker proceeds to explore how human and divine multi-modal activities could renew communities by instilling the spirit of justice, freedom, truth and peace. By striving for these four ideals, humans display the image of God and invoke the outpouring of the divine spirit.

Welker regards the rule of law as a 'crucial framework' within which the multi-modal human and divine spirit can transform repressive social conditions into just relations (p. 45). Justice is served best when power is not located in one source. He emphasises that natural law theory is not constant enough to provide us with reliable criteria for just actions. Instead, Welker considers the creative powers of both the human and divine spirit as expressed through the centuries in cognitive, moral and aesthetic communication as the best resource for a discourse on justice.

The search for justice, which is closely related to the protection of equality, must not be allowed to create new kinds of dependencies. For this reason, it is important that the 'multi-modal spirit of justice be joined by the similarly multimodal spirit of freedom' (p. 68). Freedom is essentially about preserving the independence and autonomy of human beings over and against oppressive social power. However, Welker notes that freedom is a highly fragile value, even in plural democratic societies. For this reason, it is vitally important to safeguard both personal freedom and broader political freedom through moral communication which is concerned with 'discerning the activities of the spirit of freedom' (p. 75).

In the last two chapters, Welker turns to truth and peace. Being created in the image of God, human beings are destined to be truth seekers. We must strive after truthful, valid and correct knowledge that takes into consideration the non-singular, polyphonic reality of this world. Theology has an important duty in this regard, and it must challenge religion whenever it becomes

How to cite this book review: Vorster, N., 2023, 'Reflections on the human spirit and divine spirit: Michael Welker's natural theology', *In die Skriflig* 57(1), a2915. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v57i1.2915>

Copyright: © 2023. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

a distortive force. Welker contends that the multimodal spirit of peace is intricately interwoven with the values of justice, freedom and truth. However, the dynamic interplay between these values cannot be grounded in an 'unrealistic just order' attributed to nature 'with God as its guarantor' (p. 121). To realise peace and justice, the powers of the spirit are needed and 'without the powers of the spirit, so also do the powers of God remain mysterious and obscure' (p. 121). Welker concludes his book by affirming that people are indeed called and destined to be shaped in the image of God. When people are filled by the multimodal spirit of justice that challenges unjust conditions, the multimodal spirit of freedom that seeks moral, legal and political liberation in a world of repression, the multi-modal spirit of truth that argues for tested truths and the multimodal spirit of peace that struggle against the spirit of hostility and war, they are indeed equipped to live a life 'commensurate' with the destiny of displaying the image of God (p. 131).

In God's image: An anthropology of the Spirit is an engaging cutting-edge contribution marked by creative thoughts and reflections. The realistic tenor of the arguments and the

insightful engagements with classic intellectuals are refreshing. Understandably, it is not possible for the author to explain some of the fundamental premises of his theology in depth. The book must hence be read in unison with his wider corpus of work, especially his theology on the Holy Spirit. That said, from a theological point of view, I would have appreciated a clearer articulation of what exactly is meant by the workings of the divine spirit, and how the divine and human spirit interact. Although Welker's critiques on the natural law tradition that grounds norms in creational theology or naturalism are indeed valid, it is not exactly clear whether his natural theology differs that much from those strands of the natural law tradition that ground norms in reason and conscience. I suppose Welker would call attention to his notion of multimodality. In the end, one gets the impression that the author is uncomfortable with the whole idea of natural theology. This is a sentiment that I share. Yet, it is exactly this 'uncomfortableness' that leads him into formulating a natural theology with a unique angle. Welker's novel approach might help to resolve some of the tensions between natural theologians and biblical theologians.